

# The Fragmented Writing of Immersive Theatre: A case study of Sleep No More, Shanghai version

Jingyi Zhang\*

School of Art and Communication, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, 100088, China

\*Corresponding author: 201911110106@mail.bnu.edu.cn

**Abstract.** Under the influence of postmodernism, the interpretation of fragmentation has become an important issue in the research horizon of Western scholars, who believe that modern culture has the aesthetic characteristic of "fragmentation" - a state of disconnection, alienation, and flatness. An immersive theatre is a new form of theatre under this influence, and Sleep No More is a representative example of this. Sleep No More is a 'fragmented' piece of theatre in terms of textual content, form, and connotation, and it overturns the original aesthetic concept. In terms of textual content, it promotes the fragmented presentation of narrative; in terms of interaction, it allows the audience to piece together a holistic perception of the play through immersive interaction; in terms of ideational content, it has a fragmented yet rich ideational space due to the unique experience of each person. The 'fragmented' writing of Sleep No More reflects the overall ecology of immersive theatre and is a visual manifestation of the cultural turn of modern society. The innovative development of theatre art is closely related to the changes of the times and adapts to the consumer intentions and aesthetic tendencies of popular culture in the current era.

**Keywords:** Fragmentation; Immersive theatre; Postmodernism; Sleep No More.

## 1. Introduction

The word "fragmentation", which originally meant the breaking up of the whole into many fragmentary pieces, was commonly used in the 1980s in the research literature on postmodern thought. In Postmodernism and Cultural Theory, the American literary critic Fredric Jameson first referred to postmodern culture as being fragmented, lacking in depth and shallow, disconnected without continuity and giving people a sense of abstraction and fragmented "collage" [1]. The British sociologist and theorist Zygmunt Bauman introduced the concept of 'cultural fragmentation' in *Modernity on the Move*, arguing that fragmentation is a challenge to wholeness, systematicity, and uniformity and that it allows for the release of distinctive individuality and differentiated expressions of different individuals [2]. *Walter Benjamin* uses the research method of 'grasping the totality from the fragmentation' to explore the changes in contemporary culture. He argues that in a modern society where the totality has broken down, fragmentation is a purer form of expression of the totality [3].

It can be seen that under the influence of postmodernism, the interpretation of fragmentation has become an important issue in the research horizon of Western scholars. In the development of Western civilization, the 'totality' and 'sameness' represented by traditional aesthetics have dominated people's mindsets for a long period of time, pursuing a sense of harmony, unity, and exemplary beauty. In the process of changing times and the accumulation of artistic experiences, the myth of sameness, of integrity, has been questioned and broken into countless pieces. Postmodernist scholars have argued that modern culture is characterized by a 'fragmented' aesthetic - a fractured, detached, flat state that overturns the original classical and modernist aesthetic. The influence of postmodern thinking on theatre art has not been the same as that of postmodernist architecture, art, and fiction, with a relatively stable group of artists and a relatively well-defined body of work with a clear aesthetic. However, since the 1980s and 1990s, the way in which dramatic texts are created, the way in which dramatic performances are experienced, and the shape of the theatre scene have quietly changed and reshaped the face of the theatre ecology.

## 2. Background

Immersive theatre is a new form of theatre under the influence of postmodern thinking, which has gained a certain degree of popularity both at home and abroad in recent years. The concept of "immersive theatre" comes from the idea of "environmental theatre" put forward by American theatre theorist Richard Schechner [4]. Environmental theatre requires the use of all the surrounding space for artistic performance, with multiple actions often spread out in different locations in the space and performed simultaneously. Rather than being text-driven and giving rise to additional content and modes of creation, the theatre has a fluidity and uncertainty that is given meaning through the 'engagement' of the audience. Immersive theatre is seen as a postmodern extension of environmental theatre, which emphasizes breaking out of the confines of the stage frame and the flexibility to choose the form of the spectatorial field and the relationship between the spectator and the theatre, and does not pursue a complete restoration of events or a completely linear narrative, but focuses on the interactive experience and the ideality of the environment.

In China, immersive theatre is slowly coming into the public eye, becoming a unique style in the theatre industry and adapting to the changing aesthetic needs of the people and the development of the arts industry. The immersive theatre first took shape in the 1930s. Lin Kehuan argues that During the Anti-Japanese War, many intellectuals and young students staged many short streets plays to promote resistance and boost morale, with the masses actively participating in the theatre narrative and influencing the direction of the play [5]. The first formally created immersive play in mainland China was Meng Jinghui's 2015 production of *The Mermaid by the Dead Waters*. *The Mermaid by the Dead Waters* was set in the Hive Theatre, where the audience was no longer fixed in their seats but moved around the theatre's different viewing spaces as if stepping into a labyrinth in the dark. Since then, local Chinese immersive theatre has been emerging in the theatre market, including the suspenseful play *The Disappearing Groom* directed by He Nian, the theatre project in the northern region of the "See You Again Series of Performing Arts", *See You Again Pingyao*, and another masterpiece by Meng Jinghui, *Chengdu Steals Heart*.

*Sleep No More* is an exemplary piece of immersive theatre. Created and performed in 2011 by Punchdrunk Theatre Company, a British experimental theatre company, it received an overwhelmingly positive response and became a "hit" when it was introduced to Shanghai in 2019, winning critical acclaim from theatergoers. In terms of production, *Sleep No More* is of excellent quality and has won the recognition of the industry and audiences for its scripting, acting, and set design. In terms of social impact, *Sleep No More* is one of the most influential immersive productions in the industry, with a wide audience base and a sample of theatre-goers. In terms of cultural exchange, *Sleep No More* incorporates many local Chinese elements into the British style of the original production, such as Republican costume accessories, the original canon of the story of *The White Snake* and opera songs, etc. It is a cross-cultural theatre communication phenomenon worth examining. Therefore, this paper intends to take *Sleep No More* as a sample to analyze the way immersive theatre is written in "fragmentation" and to capture the common features of immersive theatre and postmodern thinking.

## 3. A Collage of Popular Elements

"Collage" is a term that often appears in the literature of postmodernism, evolving from the 19th-century Cubist painting technique to a creative method that refers to the interception, mixing and reorganization of different elements. The 'collage technique' in *Sleep No More* challenges the original theatrical paradigm in various ways, constructing a theatrical world that is a strange and bizarre one.

First of all, *Sleep No More* is a fragmentary interception of the complete text. It is based on Shakespeare's well-known work *Macbeth* so that even if the audience has not seen the play, they can easily accept the structure of the play and understand the main idea of the story. Many of the original five acts and 27 scenes have been cut from the text of *Sleep No More*, leaving only a few key plot points that are essential to the story: Act I: *Macbeth* and *Banquo*'s triumphant return home, the first

of the Three Witch Parables, Lady Macbeth's encouragement to Macbeth to assassinate King Duncan. Act II: Macbeth's assassination of the king, Macbeth's accession to the throne, and the banquet. Act III: Macbeth's assassination of Banquo, Lady Macbeth's descent into madness, Act IV: The Second Parable of the Three Witches, Macbeth's assassination. *Sleep No More* presents the lines of Macbeth as dance movements, body language, and facial expressions, using multiple senses to recreate the text in a realistic spatial setting, not for the explicit conveyance of the narrative, not for the circularity of the plot, but for a fragmented and loose aesthetic. For example, the content of the original witch's fable is rendered entirely by physical movement, lighting, and symbolic props, with the witch using the kings of a poker card, a model tree, and the head of a dead baby to suggest the relationship between performance and text. The actors wander around the vast performance space of the MacKinnon Hotel, bringing the audience fragments of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* from one stage to another, piecing together the pieces of the theatre puzzle into a psychedelically complex three-dimensional script in a single repetition.

Secondly, in addition to presenting the main storyline of Shakespeare's classic *Macbeth*, *Sleep No More* also has a large number of fragmentary elements that are inextricably linked to the main body of the play, and the use of other elements in the play is also a means of representation. The white mask worn by the audience, for example, may have been taken from Couric's classic film *The Greatest Showman* or from the costume of the male lead in the musical *The Phantom of the Opera*. Hitchcock's film work is also a textual element with a clear intertextual relationship to *Sleep No More*. The dark and eerie lighting, the elaborate but slightly dilapidated décor, and the suspenseful objects in the theatre's McKinnon Hotel all contribute to a mysterious and frightening ambiance with a touch of Hitchcockian suspense. The story is directly based on Hitchcock's films *Butterfly Dreams* and *Vertigo* and is interlinked with the three witches in the play so that the elements of witchcraft are mixed with those of detective and suspense, adding to its richness. The Shanghai version of *Sleep No More* also incorporates elements from the Chinese folk tale *The Legend of the White Snake*, a classical love story placed in a modern English hotel narrative setting, presenting an eerie and disembodied aesthetic. *Sleep No More* also focuses on a 'hybrid' style in the presentation of aural sensory and visual effects, incorporating jazz, classical, and electronic music genres in the same scene and using modern, technologically-inspired lighting to present the struggles of a classical court. The use of multiple pop elements is like a colorful mosaic artwork, a unification of 'richness' and 'fragmentation'.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle said that 'tragedy is the imitation of a serious, complete action of a certain length'. The integrity of plot and story has been the goal of dramatists for a long period of history: the play should present a single story, with a beginning and an end, without deleting or moving any part of it or blindly adding side-stories, and should aim for "unity of action" to achieve the artistic effect of imitating reality[6]. This law maintains the closed nature of the theatrical composition, shutting out reality and creating a seamless consistency of character.

Postmodern artist Mike Featherstone believes that since reality is inherently incomplete and disparate, collage offers a glimpse into a real-world traditional art that has gone to great lengths to conceal as fragmented [7]. The 'collage technique' in *Sleep No More* challenges the original paradigm of the theatre of completeness in various ways, consisting of two processes that correspond to 'cutting' and 'pasting', respectively: the fragmentary interception of a complete text dissolves the integrity of the narrative content, breaking it into fragments; the addition of side elements to the meta-text, mixing different styles of artistic language, adds richness to the expression of a single narrative line. The audience experiences the cross-cultural, cross-genre, and multi-dimensional dynamics of theatre in one artistic medium, from one fragment to another. A theatrical mishmash of Shakespearean literature, elements of suspense, classical romance, and Western subcultures, in the process of "collage", *Sleep No More* is an echo and recreation of previous works, as well as a new and distinctive form of creative voice.

#### 4. The Immersive Experience of Being in a 'Jigsaw Puzzle'

If comparing the process of creating a theatre piece to drawing an image, then traditional theatre presents the final drawn artwork directly to the viewer, giving them an unobstructed, static aesthetic experience. Immersive theatre, on the other hand, draws the image first and then breaks it down into fragmented pieces in the performance. The act of collaging the pieces and integrating the images requires the collaboration of the audience, which is reflected in the interactive participation of the audience in the process of viewing the film.

The first step is the dismantling of the 'image' into 'fragments'. Theatre is a unity of time, place, and event, and *Sleep No More* does not present the audience with a sense of wholeness in terms of both 'space' and 'time' but rather with a fragmented, discrete state.

The spatial design of *Sleep No More* interacts with the text of the play, with each spatial unit created for the performance and the actors' performances injecting a theatrical element into the empty spatial environment, making every object in the theatre dance to the rhythm of the play. The theatre for *Sleep No More* is a six-story McKinnon Hotel, where the huge performance space is divided vertically into individual, fragmented spatial units, with each floor featuring heterogeneous stylistic features, from the delicate and elegant to the bizarre and glorious, or eerie, all in the service of the plot. Each room on each floor has a different theatrical task and, at a particular time, can trigger a specific main or secondary plot. Since ancient times, the shape of theatre in China and abroad have sought to maintain an appropriate physical and aesthetic distance between the spectator and the performer, seeking the best possible fit between 'spectacle' and 'performance'. The theatre's designers have drawn the conventional 'fourth wall' from the perspective of the producer. However, the theatre is not only a fixed place for the performance of a play, but it is also an interactive and comprehensive space that includes the space for performance, the space for viewing, and the relationship between viewing and performance. As an immersive theatre, *Sleep No More* truly plays with the subjectivity of the theatre space and provides an opportunity for interaction between the audience and the actors.

In the pursuit of a holistic perception and grasp, most play place the dramatic stories of the characters in the same place and time, but instead of integrating all the dramatic conflicts at the same time, *Sleep No More* allows each of the vivid characters to perform their individual performances in a flowing time, with dozens of storylines running simultaneously, the main story of *Macbeth* and the *Three Witches*, the *White Snake*, the *Asylum*. The main story of *Macbeth* is interwoven with the sub-stories of the *Three Witches*, the *White Snake*, and the *Asylum*, with no protagonists or supporting characters, no on and off. The whole performance is a polyphonic piece, with the melodies of the various voices independent of each other and yet overlapping at points in time to form chords. *Sleep No More* dismantles the theatre into spatial fragments in which each character's story is just a fragment of time scattered across a huge space, like the world, where the actions of the characters take place in the present tense, and there is only the passage of time and the millions of stories that alternate and are stacked in it.

The second step is the integration of the fragments into images. The 'fragmented' presentation of time and space deprives the reader of the God's-eye view of the whole but gives him or her the autonomy to choose how to watch the play. Each audience member travels through six floors of space, choosing to follow the flow of the main plot or to explore the subplots and to stay or leave at any scene of the performance. They can find an unknown actor, open an unknown door, enter an enclosed space, or even have a one-on-one experience with a character in a play, all of which is unknowable and where and how it will play out. The 90 rooms, large and small, including the chambers, the ballroom, the cemetery, the dining room, and the asylum, form a vast museum where, over the course of three hours, each audience member chooses to watch different scenes of the play, searching for a different sensory experience, with a myriad of possibilities for the permutations of different plot fragments. As the audience roams and stops over and over again, they accumulate fragments of theatre, integrating and processing the fragmentary sequences they have seen in their minds. As they sort through the plot and reflect on the process of watching the play, the fragmented, disparate and

incomplete pieces of the theatre puzzle gradually merge, nestle and take shape in their minds - and the 'puzzle game' is complete.

Sleep No More is more of an adventure game than a play. From the moment they enter the McKinnon Hotel, the audience enters a dark and unknown place, ready to embark on a three-hour adventure. In Sleep No More, the audience is both a spectator and a performer. Every time the audience goes, stays, stops or moves in or out determines the direction of the play and influences the content of the actors' performances. The actors are also the audience, adjusting their performance by observing their surroundings and always managing their relationship with the audience and the environment. The relationship between the audience and the actors is no longer one of watching and being watched but one of dualistic interaction and equality, where the two rub shoulders with each other to create a collage of images. There are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes, and there are countless dreams in Sleep No More of countless audiences.

## 5. A Multifaceted and Fragmented Personal Perception

In its collage of popular texts, Sleep No More dismantles the complete theatre space and time flow into fragments, allowing the audience to explore on their own and gain a different experience. Not only does it break the shackles of "wholeness" in terms of content and form, but its ideological connotations also have a multiplicity of meanings and fluidity.

The different ways of viewing the film allow the audience to have a variety of experiences. The interconnectedness and complexity of the main and subplots in Sleep No More form a three-dimensional picture. Those who follow the main storyline are given a complete picture of Macbeth and perhaps reflect on Shakespeare's original exploration of power, desire, intrigue, and predestination. Those who follow the subplots will delve into the love/hate relationship between the red-skirted witch, the sexy witch, the bald witch, and the male witch, which is intertwined with the main thread. The audience will also explore the hidden chapters of "Asylum", "Butterfly Dream" and "The Legend of the White Snake". While some viewers simply chose to watch the scattered main and subplots, they may have been rewarded with an exciting journey of discovery with a sense of suspense and an audio-visual impact. Some readers even unlocked the '1on1' interaction, playing directly with the actors and assisting them with the narrative, shifting their identities during the experience, gaining a dual identity, and triggering serendipitous drama ..... Sleep No More is like an elephant, and the audience is the blindfolded elephant, each one knowing the parts rather than the whole but not losing the ability to access the information and instead treasuring a unique and personal experience.

The creators of the New York version of Sleep No More have said: "You come to the play with a purpose, and it will give you answers. Maybe you are a fan, or you go to the theatre a lot and are familiar with Shakespeare, or you are in Shanghai for the first time and want to experience it; this space will give you what you want to see[8]." With the creative team constantly calling on audiences to confidently explore personal ways of seeing, the space for interpreting the text of Sleep No More is unrequited, diverse and rich, floating with the subjective emotional state of the viewer.

This diversity of personal feelings changes the state of affairs in which "opinion leaders" dominate the critical landscape. Because no one has access to the full picture of the play, there is no authority on what is good or bad to watch. The fact that everyone is 'in the middle of the mountain' and cannot get the full view reflects the equality of power in theatre viewing. Each person is a single subject with the freedom to explore the play and pursue different perceptions. Thus, unlike other productions where there is an authoritative critic or a consensus of viewers, Sleep No More presents a 'decentralized' and discrete state in which all people can express their own private viewing experience without worrying about whether their opinions are contrary to popular opinion because, in the context of this production, there is no 'mainstream' or 'mainstream' discussion. There is no 'mainstream' or 'niche', only a myriad of different viewing experiences.

David Tewksbury believes that most traditional theatre seeks a coherent narrative and a homogeneity of meaning, where the play tells a complete story, illustrating an idea and expressing

thought through the presentation of a 'meaningful form'[9]. However, immersive theatre emphasizes multi-dimensionality and multiplicity of meaning, rejecting a monolithic narrative system of interpretation and refusing to offer a 'uniform' meaning to the audience or reader, with the multiplicity of meaning arising from the complexity of people's feelings. A clear single narrative line with causal connections, vivid characters and coherent character development, and a closed ending pointing to a specific meaning are all broken down and replaced by collages, blends, fragmented narratives, interactive experiences, open endings, and ambiguous representations. Perhaps it is this "fluidity" and "fragmentation" that is the appeal of *Sleep No More*. The "fragmented" experience of each individual represents a multifaceted and fluid emotional state, emphasizing a three-dimensional presentation rather than the monopoly of a single mind, which meets people's multi-layered and multi-dimensional aesthetic needs.

## 6. The Cultural Implications of Immersive Theatre's 'Fragmented' Writing

The systematic discourse on "fragmentation" emerged in a postmodern context. On the one hand, fragmentation has been interpreted in a positive sense in terms of its rebellion against and disruption of the whole, identifying with the aesthetic way of perceiving the whole through the fragments; on the other hand, fragmentation symbolizes the disconnection between the fragments and the whole, the inability of people to perceive the whole through the fragments, fragmentation refers to a flatness without depth, a sense of detachment without a global concept, a kind of collage and fracture.

In Postmodernism and Cultural Theory, Frederick Jameson, a leading contemporary Western critic, states: "The postmodern is actually symptomatic of the deep structural changes in our society and culture as a whole [10]." As an exemplary representative of immersive theatre, *Sleep No More*'s artistic approach of 'fragmented' writing has a rich background of practice in other immersive plays and has become a common feature. The artistic value of the 'fragmented' writing of immersive theatre as an established form of representation is also worthy of consideration. Whether total innovation in the theatre environment can replace the hodgepodge and collage of texts, whether individualized play experiences can replace the inherent communal nature of theatre, whether formal innovation can replace the hollowness of content, whether floating and fragmented representations can replace a consensual perception All of this is debatable. What is undeniable is that immersive theatre is shaping the theatre in every way, not simply as a phenomenon but as a manifestation of a cultural shift.

Firstly, the fragmentary interception of complete narratives in immersive theatre is in line with the changing perception of time and space in modern society. Ji Qilin argues that In the present day, the overuse of media can divide real life time into 'everyday time' and 'mimetic time'[11]. In everyday time, people perform physical work to meet the needs of survival, life, and development and engage in direct face-to-face communication with others. The time that would otherwise tend to be complete is always taken up by mimetic time and media time, creating a sense of 'time tension' —a shortening and fragmentation of everyday time. The essence of theatre is theatricality and presence, which cannot be replaced by other media like other artistic disciplines, and while people are used to enjoying all forms of art in cyberspace, theatre remains at a distance from virtualization. The fragmentary narrative of immersive theatre allows people not to spend long periods of time trying to understand a new play but to experience an atmosphere in a fragment. Instead of experiencing a complete story in the full flow of time, people prefer to find the meaning of the narrative in a short, fragmentary storytelling that takes up less time.

Once again, the multiplicity of ideational connotations in immersive theatre is in line with the diverse and heterogeneous aesthetic tendencies of the current generation. As the history of artistic creation continues to accumulate, there are many different kinds of cultural and artistic products with a wide variety of categories and styles, and people's tendency to 'consume' artworks is becoming more diverse. It is difficult to find a so-called 'mainstream' aesthetic to support the audience's choice of theatre, as everyone's preferences are diverse and fragmented and cannot be unified by a dominant aesthetic. Unlike traditional theatre, immersive theatre does not have a clear ideological connotation

but is given a variety of meanings depending on the audience's theatre-going experience, which is in line with the current aesthetic tendency to 'subvert authority and find a uniquely personal home and imprint.

In essence, an immersive theatre is a form of theatre that balances the ritualistic nature of theatre art with the entertaining nature of mass cultural consumption. In the age of new media, many art forms have lost their original solemnity through the use of media and have become pieces of culture dependent on virtual media. Complete literary works have become easy to disseminate paragraphs, and people tend to browse through short stories on their mobile phone screens, leaving books in the corner; the ubiquitous availability of film clips and movie resources on the internet has replaced the traditional way of going to the cinema to enjoy the audio-visual illusion, and movies are no longer cinematic; digital music works are grabbing people's attention on various website platforms, and modern music works are full of all kinds of music. The originality of music has been questioned and challenged by the collage and mishmash of various musical elements in modern music works. In contrast, a theatre is an art form that is in part a resistance to the current context of fragmented and entertaining artistic creation. Theatre cannot exist outside of the physical space of the theatre, and both environmental construction and textual narrative are important elements in the creation of theatre. People may perceive theatre through online communication, but only when they enter a physical theatre and spend a few hours experiencing theatre can they truly gain a complete understanding of theatre. A "sense of ritual".

However, at the same time, immersive theatre, while retaining a sense of ritual in the theatre, fits in with the current psychology of mass culture towards the consumption of artistic products. Immersive theatre emphasizes the collage and hodgepodge of texts and promotes the fragmented presentation of narratives. Through immersive interaction, it enables the audience to independently piece together a holistic perception of the theatre plays and has a fragmented yet rich ideational space due to each person's unique experiential process. This is in line with the contemporary values of sensory experience and artistic entertainment. The media's fragmentation and dismantling of works of art make people tend to try to restore the overall appearance of the work from fragmentary passages, which is in line with people's aesthetic tendencies; immersive theatre is more like a kind of immersive escape room, where people can gain a sense of game experience at the same time as watching the play, which makes the consumption of art particularly worthwhile and has both artistic and entertaining properties. Thus, immersive theatre is both a resistance to the "fragmented" context of artistic creation and a silent response to the aesthetic changes and consumer psychology of people due to its unique artistic language.

## 7. Conclusion

Sleep No More has a "fragmented" ideographic character in terms of textual content, viewing the form, and ideographic connotation, and it breaks away from the original aesthetic concept. In terms of textual content, traditional theatre emphasizes the unity and continuity of the narrative, with the aim of recreating a logical and orderly sequence of events. The immersive drama *Sleepless Night*, on the other hand, emphasizes the fragmented nature of the narrative and its fragmented presentation. The text is no longer closed, homogeneous, and unified but open, heterogeneous, fragmented, and multi-voiced. In terms of interaction, the traditional theatre emphasizes the plot in the same time and space and gives the audience a God's-eye view of the play. *Sleepless Night*, on the other hand, breaks up the huge space into multiple rooms, arranging multiple narrative threads in the flow of time, allowing the reader to choose the fragments of the play to watch and to piece together a holistic perception of the play through immersive interaction. In terms of ideational connotations, while traditional theatre emphasizes the unity of a closed, complete narrative and consistent connotations, *Sleepless Night* has a fragmented yet rich ideational space due to the unique experiential process of each person.

The innovative development of theatre art is closely related to the changes of the times and adapts to the consumer intentions and aesthetic tendencies of popular culture in the current era. In recent years, local immersive theatre has been emerging in China, and with the help of multimedia modern technology and internet applications, it is constantly adapting to technological changes and the transformation of aesthetic culture. Perhaps in the future, immersive theatre will become more acceptable to the public and even become the mainstream of theatre, and continue to shape our cultural form and further promote the exploration of theatre art.

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